Hate Machine

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Hate Machine

by Aerosol

Summary

Hannibal is invited by a former colleague to observe today’s solar eclipse on his property and takes Will with him. Will is not too happy about it, being dragged to an event where he knows no one and is probably just stated as the crazy man who has been in the BSHCI for months. But when he meets their host 'Connor' he can think of an easy way to get Hannibal back for it... but it doesn't turn out as he planned it to be.

You are the only one, the only one,

the only one for me
You are the only one, the only one,

the only one

I am the chosen one, the chosen one,

the chosen one for you
I am the chosen one, I froze your lungs,

your breath tells me the truth

~ Hate Machine *by* The Neigbourhood feat. Danny Brown ~

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Will was truly convinced that he would never get used to Hannibal's car. Never. Not in a million years.

Dwelling on the passenger seat next to the psychiatrist and feel the expensive, smooth leather leaned against his back was a strange feeling, no matter how often he sat in this vehicle. The material was finely selected, the interior spacious and everywhere the ingredients of Hannibal's sharply spiced cologne poured over him, even if he got out to refuel. All these impressions were different, fresh and bottomless than Will knew it from his own lovingly titled *rust bucket*. In his car it did not smell after classic floral ornaments but wet dog and the blanket he had spread out on the back seat and been an indisputably dominant element for years there, covered with rippling, colorful collections of swirled hair. Will was, however, pretty sure that this kind of *scent mark* was not one of Lecter's favorites and was reassured by the fact that he chose to chauffeur him in his Bentley yet again. Of course Will could have lodged a complaint, but he knew Hannibal's unwavering patience and persistence in issues such as these, so he preferred to save his breath and look out the window. He believed his muteness during the ride would be punishment enough and it stayed that way.

Shortly after they had started from Hannibal's home, rain had set in. The drops drummed like

the fluttering heartbeat of a young chicken against the surface and painted branched streaks over the clean glass, reducing the outside world to a walking mess of blurred lights and flickering outlines of roofs and trees. Will remembered how he had followed those streaks with his fingertips as a child. Nowadays, he only *imagined* to do it. His hands stayed in his lap, silent and motionless. The belt cut tightly into his shoulder, holding his upright posture. Now and then he glanced at the small rectangular mirror he had opened and pulled to him from the ceiling**.** He had never been very vain, but the attire in which he found himself deserved a certain amount of repeated control.

„Why do we need to attend this party again?" he asked rigorously in the calm that had spread between them like a breathing vacuum. He deliberately avoided to look at Hannibal. This lacked him the same courtesy by unabatedly inspecting the road though there was not a single other car that drove near their reach.

"I was invited by a former colleague to observe today's solar eclipse on his property. We studied medicine together." the elder informed scarcely**.** Will continued to stare outside. His mind drifted vagueely to an article in yesterday's newspaper. It had been reported and warned of the rare natural phenomenon and the specially made glasses one should wear for it. Without precaution one could go blind permanently when the moon pushed in front of the sun like a black lense**.** Actually it did not quite matter to Will whether the day wrapped in darkness or not, but he was not surprised that the high society Hannibal belonged to made a weighty spectacle out of it. He critically eyed the rain and the anthracite-gray clouds above them. Not good to admire a solar eclipse. But the weather forecast promised it should clear up later ...

"Uhu." he muttered. He snuggled deeper into the seat and crossed his legs. "And why do **I** have to go there then? " He was well aware that he probably sounded like a grouching teenager who was dragged to the wedding of an unknown cousin, but he did not mind. Previously, he would not have allowed himself to talk with Lecter in this rebellious tone, yet since he had been released from the institution the parameters of their power structure had moved into an almost-center field and he was secretly pleased to fully exploit all results appealing to him.

"Connor's invitation said I could bring some company and I took the opportunity." Lecter answered annoyingly calm. Will bit into the flesh of the inside of his cheek.

"And as what will they think of me? As your patient or *the one who has not killed all those people*?" he drilled contemptuously. But the idea that people would pounce on him like vultures, appeared suspicious and disgusting to him at the same time. Freddie Lounds had an alarmingly huge readership (even *postmortem*) and he hardly believed the illusion that public interest spared him today. The conversation between them paused tensely until Hannibal turned from the main road and drove into a slender sweeping path, the height exponentially increasing with upcoming meters. Will remembered that *Connor*'s country house was built on a hill, entirely incorporated by the splashing green of newborn spring. Almost quaint. A pleasant thought. He might even have been looking forward to this party, if it had not been of such aristocratic nature.

"As my good friend." the elder said. Will's eyes narrowed to amused slits.

“*Good friend* ?” he echoed. He laughed dryly. “You’re such a hypocrite.”

Hannibal paused.

“In what way?” he said slowly. “Don’t I say the truth?”

“You say **your** version of the truth. I’d be surprised if you ever accepted another.”

“As what would you define yourself in terms of my person?”

“*Emergency ration*.” Will replied pointedly. And left it at that. The road in front of them fell into a rising slope. Hannibal removed one hand from the steering wheel to grip beside him and set a higher gear. Will looked to his right and saw a corn field. He watched how the golden crowns swayed gently in the whistling blast of east wind.

“Will, have I done something to make you... angry?” Will had expected this question much earlier. He tilted his head back and folded his arms across his stomach. The tundra-blue iris entwined with the fawn car deck.

Well, you let me vomit Abigail's ear, then made sure I waste away in prison for months, then you slept with Alana multiple (!) times, then you wanted me to fight against a not so *harmless patient of yours and THEN you initiated the destruction of my hypothetical child.*

... But no, you could never make me angry. I mean, **YOU** *? Ridiculous!*

All that he could have screamed into his face straight ahead, and Hannibal would have hardly batted an eyelash.

“You know how much I hate events like this.” Will said instead. “They force me to be 'social'.“

“I'm sure you'll cope with this situation perfectly.”

“Guess there’s not other option left for me than that.”

Will turned his head so that his eyes x-rayed the right side of Hannibal’s face.

“Why are you doing this to me? Haven’t I been a good boy lately?” he asked. Hannibal avoided his gaze, something that happened rarely.

“It’s not a punishment. I want to introduce you.” Will moved slightly to the left, shifting closer to him. The belt tucked into his skin in protest as the focus of his weight changed, but he ignored the pain. He frowned.

“What for?” he prodded relentlessly. “Want to show me off like a trained pet? Give the rumor mill some food?” Hannibal did not even begrudge him the effort of a head-shake. But at least he got a quick, albeit razor-sharp look. Will felt the certainty that he circulated close to a

looming limit and it tingled like effervescent powder on his tongue. He bit his lips and made sure that Hannibal saw it.

“Betwixt and between.” replied Lecter, simultaneously following the rosy tip of his tongue that dipped the profiler’s lower lip in a wet sheen. “I’ve promised Connor an *exceptional guest*. It would be rude to disappoint him.”

Will made a clicking noise with his tongue.

“You don’t say.”

They arrived at a shallower level they could pass through without difficulty. Will darted his eyes forward and looked at a country house not far away from them, built and decorated in the style of Italian Renaissance. Will acknowledged the characteristics of the Ionic columns to the far expiring inputs and gardens with a single glance**.** And hesitated.

“Uhm, Hannibal ...?”

“Yes?”

“Is this what I think it is?”

Will could almost draw the smile in Hannibal's voice in the air while he spoke.

“Well, what *do* you think?”

“It looks like a Palladian villa.” Will raised an eyebrow and stared questioningly at the doctor. “The last time I've seen such a building was on a poorly lit projector in school.”

Hannibal’s smile planted further in his eyes, brightened up where previously a hint of resentment had nestled into its place. Apparently he was mitigated by Will’s genuine amazement.

“Connor has received the inheritance of his deceased aunt from England seven years ago. With the money he built an exact replica of the Villa Rotonda and uses it as scountry house for warmer months ever since. He fulfilled himself a childhood dream. Architecture and art are his greatest passions beside medicine.”

Will was rather taken aback than impressed. He did not want to imagine how much money, sweat and fatal accidents this project had cost as a whole.

“Connor is ... specific, right?” he drawled. Hannibal tilted his head.

“He’s a bit eccentric.” he revealed. Will placed himself back in his seat properly and kept a musing silence.

They parked a few meters away from the house on a meticulously mowed lawn. The blades were cut so accurately that Will wondered if they had been measured with a goddamn ruler.

The rumbling of the dying engine recalled the start of a race to which participation Will had not explicitly given his consent.

“We’re here.” Hannibal informed. Without a word Will reached for the door handle when warm fingertips stroked his sleeve. He raised his head. Hannibal's gaze was fixed on him.

“Wait, before we go ... “ he began, but Will interrupted him.

“What? Afraid that I embarrass you?” he said sourly. A fine wrinkle formed on Lecter's forehead.

“This is the least of my fears.”

“Tell me then.”

“Connor knows some pretty ... 'provocative' people. If one of them points out something regarding your stay in prison, or your profession – stay calm.”

Will rolled his eyes.

“Sure.”

As if I had a choice.

A second time he was going to get out of the car when Hannibal’s strict tone pulled him back again.

“Will.”

“Hm?“ The profiler sounded as if he was innocence itself. (A bad joke, considering that he had skinned a man and put his head on a saber-toothed tiger skeleton hardly one month ago. *Innocent* was definitely something else ...).

Hannibal did not enter his game for one second. Instead, he let his gaze focuse on his hairline, wander up and end at his legs, wrapped tightly in black shining cloth.

“You look amazing.” he said.

Will smiled and for a single moment, his sarcastic shell cracked.

“Thank you ... I’m curious if Connor returns your compliment.”

Winking at him, he got out of the car before Hannibal had the chance to reprimand him properly for this answer. He knew his behavior would cause a little *sequel* soon as they drove back, but he did not care much. Hannibal had dragged him here against his will – he had to face the consequences.

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Connor Archibald Hemsley was a tall, slender man with broad shoulders, smooth black hair held high by gel and formed into spines, sticking out from his head in all directions. He had a mischievous, cheeky smile that made him look much younger than he actually was.

When he saw them walking into the hall he welcomed them with a rich, warm handshake. Questions of etiquette were exchanged, whether the trip was bearable, the mood light and expectations for the coming solar eclipse high. Hannibal took the largest part of the conversation. Will preferred to watch. At first glance, Connor seemed to be a tolerable person, cheerful and lively. A not too inconsiderable contrary to Hannibal ... Will wondered what their conversations had been about beyond their study time. He waited patiently until Hannibal put a hand on his lower back and officially introduced him. (Not without a certain satisfaction, as Will acknowledged).
Connor's eyes were of a luscious leaf green and formed sparks when he took Will's appearance in inspection.

“So ... this is that *Will Graham*, Hannibal has raved about during so many calls. He did not exaggerate, you’re very pleasing to the eye. Perhaps you could have served as sculpture model in the Renaissance.”

Will grinned at him openly. Before everything that had happened in the past six months, he’d simply have buried his head in the sand or reacted with ironic aggression. Now he offered himself to the paid attention. The metamorphosis Hannibal pushed him into also had pleasant, bloodless aspects. This self-indulgence, for example, was extremely useful in some situations. Situations like this one here.

“Merci.” he replied gallantly. (The only word he knew in French and it still danced shamelessly self-assured on his tongue). “I don’t get to hear such compliments often.”

Connor raised a playful eyebrow.

“You should.” he replied, amused. His eyes climbed deeper where dull fabric blocked an impeccable vision for social chastity’s sake. “The sculptors of that time had a soft spot for the youth…”

Hannibal cleared his throat.

“Connor, please-.”

“Oh, no no, Hannibal, let him talk.” Will interrupted before the doctor could dampen the mood. He threw a challenging glance at the elder before he boldly linked arms with Connor, looking at him good-naturedly. “Keep on talking, Connor. You can tell me more on the way

to the party. I see this building has been inspired by the values of Renaissance too. The colums gave it away."

Connor's eyes widened.

"In fact!" he exclaimed proudly. "An exact replica of Villa Rotonda."

Will did as if he was ecstatic. Not an overly complicated reaction since Connor seemed easy to be deceived. Or *wanted* to be easily deceived, depending on how one saw it.

"You don't say! I knew it was no accident that I've thought of Andrea Palladio when we went in."

Connor craned his neck to brush Hannibal with a reproachful look. They moved from the foyer into a larger hall.

"Hannibal, you didn't tell me he's a little connoisseur in art history."

Hannibal smiled. For Will it seemed rather forced.

"Now, Will is *full of surprises*." he said sharply. "One of his many strenghts."

"Hmm, I hope he allows me to find more than one today. " Connor turned back to Will. Something flashed in his iris that made the profiler curious, but cautious as well. "Um, the actual festivities take place in the garden, but if you want I'll show you the rest of the house before we join the other guests. Hannibal knows it already."

There lay a hobbling, yet charming awkwardness in his tone while he asked and Will knew Connor's main intention was to have him all to himself for a a little while. He cocked his head.

"Sounds like fun." His eyes flickered to the psychiatrist. "We'll meet later, *right*, Hannibal?"

What he read in Hannibal's iris was far away from any serenity. He knew the fire in them that pegged way to curl around pitch-black pupils. It expressed 'displeasure'. *Immense* 'displeasure'.

"Of course." Hannibal replied to him quiet as stone, an accurate paradox to his internal state which probably boiled for several reasons. "I expect him back in one piece, Connor." he said to their host. He only winked at him.

"Don't worry, I'll take good care of him. It will be quick." He instructed Will to follow him to a darker side corridor of the building leading to a staircase and shielded them from the eyes of the lower floor.

Will listened with half an ear as Connor dived straight into his enthusiastic chatter about Andrea Palladio and his résumé.

He was much more interested in the twinge between his shoulder blades caused by a mahogany-brown look that held a quivering competition to the violence of Alighieri's inferno by now. It brought Will a tense smile on his lips and staged it as it to apply to Connor's detailed description of how Palladio was discovered by his future teacher.

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The gorgeous youth was of sublime ease in form and essence, and yet heavier than he appeared at first. The natural color of his hair was no longer recognizable, backed away by all the gray dust that had crept into the thick strands. It bent at the edges of his head and at the base of his neck to lean locks and curled the fringes so they did not fall over his dreamy eyes and blocked his view. Looking into the distance, his torso was firm and bare, finely toned muscles shading his abdomen and the area of his chest. His waist ran out in a diffractive bow, aesthetic to the human eye and the love for accurate proportions. One arm clung to his side, the other one to the corner of a gray cloth draped over his shoulder. He held his head gently to the left, while the rest of his body presented itself frontally. Soft draped shadow and imprudent bones conducted to his pelvis, garlanded by a maze of pubic hair. It embowered the trough of his phallus, highlighted by the pressing testicles underneath, quite unchastely exposing him to the judgment of passing crowds while palely incident light crowned his ashen skin. His legs sprouting from his hips were long and sturdy. As sure as God he set foot on the plateau allotted to him and held his form upright and utterly beautiful.

Will looked at him for a while before he turned his gaze to the opened window blazing the place with smooth, hot sun. He definitely knew why Connor had chosen to put the statue here.

"Very bold." he said.

"Really?" Will heard steps resound louder behind him until the other man stood on his left, hands casually hidden in the pockets of his aquamarine jacket. His gaze remained unabated at the sculptural brilliance laid before them as if it were honey and Connor a hungry drone wishing to feast on every inch.

"For me, David is Michelangelo's most divine legacy of everything he made. This work is an unexceptional icon to anatomy and free spirit."

Will gave him a small smile. It was kind of refreshing with what childlike euphoria Connor hung on these pieces. It was not rehearsed, not for a deeper purpose. It was so easy and real, almost cordial. Quite different from Hannibal who always kept his sturdy frame and saw it as form of art to maintain a non-binding expression in public word and deed. Will had nothing

against the little change in his company. Especially not if he knew the psychiatrist was not too pleased by it.

“I agree with you.” He did an extravagant gesture. “I’m not referring to David here - rather that you present me such an egregious **naked** work like it was the still life of a bowl of fruit. Something that should usually be saved for the third date, shouldn’t it?”

Connor laughed. It chimed lucid in Will's ears. They were on a high vault of the villa, reminding the profiler more of a high spiked attic. They walked through a hall, crammed and covered with paintings, sculptures and other works of art that might have accumulated over time.

Will took a last look at the replica of David, then accompanied Connor in his further path that wound through the small sights like a lazy snake.

“I like your humor.” he said. “I understand why Hannibal cherishes your company. He always had a weakness for sharp tongues - as long as they coupled with intellectual remarks.”

Will strained his ears.

“So, what was *Hannibal the student* like?” he asked. And at the same moment he was a bit surprised himself that it really interested him.

Connor blew out his cheeks until they were round and plump and recalled one of the chubby-cheeked cherub statues before he uttered the air out, racing letters between his lips.

“Oh, he was quite memorable.” he mused. “A mind like an elephant and hands silent and precise like a cobra before its deadly bite – a compliment, of course.”

“I’d never have taken it as something less.” Will looked back to the front, got stuck on a copy of Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. “He **is** an acrobat with his hands. Whether he’s cooking or drawing. It’s unlikely that surgery was any different to him.”

“How is he getting on as psychiatrist?”

“He’s always purposeful in what he does.” A barely perceptible sigh clambered up his throat. “And, let's say, his methods, as well as the resulting outcomes, are unique.”

“In what way?”

Will put a finger against his pinkish mottled mouth, as if he’d hiss a *Psst*.

“Sorry, my lips are sealed. Medical secrecy.”

Connor grinned.

“Hey, I thought, this only goes for the therapist himself?”

“Quid pro Quo.” Will shrugged. “I give back what I get. This doesn’t stop with the protection of privacy.”

“If so, then please forgive me this question ... “ Connor stopped abruptly next to a row of medieval armor. Will stopped too. Waited. He looked as Connor licked his lips. Was he nervous? No, a man like Connor was not often nervous... maybe *excited* ? “Sorry, but I'm terribly curious. Are you romantically involved with Hannibal?”

Will raised a brow. He had not expected this question.

“What makes you think that?”

“When he looked after us, I thought he wanted to ram a battalion of daggers in my back.”

This put a grin on the profiler’s face.

“Ah, it caught your eye.”

Connor's hands moved to his clothes and set up the collar.

“Sometimes one might think his eyes burn right through the dirty ground of your soul if you let them.” he said, patted his shoulders to peel off any telltale dust from his jacket. “I'm used to interpret them. I know Hannibal for years.”

*Certainly not as good as **I** know him.* Will thought. And wondered if the tiny feeling of triumph he felt flourish at this thought should cause him serious worry.

He approached the armors that had been positioned like the guardians of an ancient cemetery crypt. Their condition was impressively immaculate. No scratches, no stains, just sooty dust on the hot shimmering metal plates. Will thought of how they could move their well oiled limps, free themselves from this stand and stab the guests with their lances and swords like porkers ... nothing of that was brutal to him. Hannibal would have probably not thought of it to be brutal either.
What mesmerized him most was the one armor that carried an axe which blade measured the length of his forearm. It was no bulky weapon at all, the wood of the stock delicately wrought and decorated with symbolic lilies. Even this artifact sparkled in the sun like the surface of Lake Michigan at summer’s zenith. He held out his hand and stroked with his fingertips over the steel that had been forged hundreds of years ago. Could it still be that sharp... - ?

Ouch.

Yes. It could. It fucking could.

With morbid fascination he observed how a burgundy red trickle fled from the flesh-colored tower of his index finger and swam to his palm, daubing the crinkling lines there. He made no sound, whether a sound of pain, nor anger, nor agony. Another of those changes Hannibal had unleashed. His confused perspective catapulted into a different angle when he saw blood, regardless of whether it was his own or that of a stranger. He was almost arbitrarily aware

that Connor was watching him, but he did like he paid no attention to it.

He thought back to the question he had been asked. Whether Hannibal and he extended the boundaries of a pure companionship. Will laughed inwardly as this question for it suddenly seemed so clumsy and stumbling in relation to earlier events. But it was only a question after all...

Without thinking, he led the bleeding fingertip to his lips and sipped at it as if it was wine. The taste of sweetness and sour metal filled him and drained on the floor of his tongue. He knew this flavor already, had savored it so many times ... He licked his lips to wipe off the dark color left on them. He threw Connor a suspicious glance.

“Let’s say ... it’s intimate.” he said. The edge of his tongue still dipped in his lifeline. Then the slick, agile muscle disappeared into the cavern of his mouth. *Intimate*. Yes, this was the term that seemed to fit them best. Always.

He registered that Connor had to swallow a chunk of air before he continued speaking.

“Does that mean he would mind if I’d borrow you for a special session?“

“It depends on what kind of session I shall take part in.”

“I am an amateur sculptor out of passion.” Connor nodded toward the young man born from native stone and marble, a breathless beauty who’d never call a heart his own. “I am looking for a suitable model to emulate Michelangelo's David for a very long time now. Frankly, you’re shortlisted.”

Will’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Is this a joke? You don’t even know how I look without this suit.”

“We could change that right now.”

The invitation was as prompt as it was unmistakable. If Will had held a drink in his hand, he would have probably put it on a tray and left the room without a word. However, since they were only two in this room and the possible significance of this abrupt confidentiality weighed like granite boulders on Will's nerves at once, he preferred to choose his actions more firmly. He looked directly into Connor's fluorescent green.

“Hannibal took me here to marvel at the incoming solar eclipse. Not to get out of this expensive suit and be carved out of a block of stone.” he corrected coldly. Connor tilted his head. The ascended hostility he did not seem to mind at all.

“He also didn’t mention how visually appealing you truly are.” he replied thoughtfully. “He just scattered crumbs about you, a few grains here and there. Guess he wants to keep you all for himself. Can’t blame him for that.”

“Hannibal is no one who brags openly. Although modesty is foreign to him too.”

Will secretly referred to the works and constellations the doctor locked in his murders, in flesh, blood and sight. And from time to time in an exorbitant flower arrangement when he thought of *the man in the tree*.

Connor looked at him. Deliberative, yes, sad, somehow. Regretful. And, this time, with a pinch of honest hunger.

“He does not have to brag. Everyone can see it. Your walk, your eyes, your voice ... I envy the ease with which he placed his hand on your back, when he introduced you ...” He wanted to say more, his opened lips yearned for it, but he did not and his undivided words swung deafly in the shared atmosphere.

Will pressed his lips to a thin line.

“I think I’ve seen enough.” he said. “Thank you very much for this little guide. Your collection is impressive.”

He turned to leave, sought to head in a different direction and a hallway that led him back to a staircase and the villa’s lower level.

Every muscle in his body tensed in alarm when his wrist was grabbed from behind.

“Forgive me if I-“

“We should join the other guests, don’t you think?” interrupted Will, as if the former words never had existed between them. In passing, he slipped (with minimal brutality) from the unpleasant, clinging grip. “We don’t want to miss the solar eclipse.”

Connor wore an indefinable expression on his face. Will perceived a touch of bitter disappointment as well as germinating anger over the snub the younger man had caused him. Will did not have the time or desire to feel embarrassed for having rejected his avances. It was his right to do that as it should be for everyone else.

“Yes ... that would be a shame.” he heard him mumble as he discovered a narrow passage in a niche, linked with sunshine. He heard Connor’s steps while making his way out and walking through the corridor.

But never, not once, Connor made another attempt to start a conversation or to touch him.

And Will found that he had to concede at least one advantage of Hannibal’s colleagues.

They learned quickly.

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“You smell like blood.”

Hannibal’s resentful presence spread around him like a shield woven of stars and coal. Will heard him and how his breath stroked against his earlobe. To his own surprise, he did not shudder at the contact this time.

Since the rain had heralded its end, there was mockingly wonderful weather. *As if it had specifically set up for attending a solar eclipse – oh, the fucking irony*, thought Will not for the first time since he stood at the buffet’s delivery of the buffet, pilfering small delicacies while small groups of people unfolded themselves in gossip like a bat its leathery wings to fly. He had not made an effort to look after Hannibal himself – there was no doubt that he would find him. He always did.

The festivities around them celebrated in a vivid way and nobody bothered them with looks and squeaking voices. *A blessing* as Will meant and took a bite of the shrimp he had plucked from its cup, filled with bright red chili.
Still chewing, he breathed appreciatively, then he held out his hand and presented the dark-rimmed fingertip where the origin of the leaked blood already painted a brown crust.

“I cut myself on an axe. Nothing to worry about.” He blinked over his shoulder. “He has a convoluted collection.”

Hannibal’s features did not even respond with a fold. He looked stoic and compact. A little stiff, one could say. Will wondered if he had imagined morally questionable scenarios during his absence, mangling Connor in the dark chambers of his soul with his teeth for it…

“So? What was his concern?” He almost crushed the words on his tongue before he instilled them in Will's ear canal. They were backed thickly and grumbling from his accent. Will would have known it through a thousand choirs and chatter.

Sighing, he arched his back like a cat that awakened from its nap, knowing that Hannibal stood behind him only inches away, following his every stretching movement, and steered the focus of his body backwards, leaning against broad chest and strong arms. They embraced him, incarcerated him from both sides like pulsating iron rails and he did not expect anything else. Heat everywhere on the roof of his skull and his skin, reddened under fabric. To be honest he would have been disappointed if it could be any other way.

“He wanted me to undress myself.” he muttered in a whisper, his left temple gently scraping against Hannibal's chin. It allowed a twitch of the doctor's mouth.

“Sex? During his own party? I had thought him more patient.”

Will offered the remaining half of his shrimp by leading it to Hannibal. The elder stared at the sea creature briefly before he split his lips and clapped them around it. Will watched him, as the shrimp vanished between sharp edged teeth and felt the tongue that licked along his recently healed cut. His hackles raised up at the wet heat swallowing him. It was perfectly

clear that Hannibal rather tasted his flesh instead of the aqueous sweetness of unseasoned fish.

“No. He just raved about creating a sculpture of my image. To imitate Michelangelo's David. Although I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have said no to a quickie on one of those King Louis tables.” He wriggled his fingers free before Hannibal came up with the idea to bite him. “Don’t be mad, I refused his offer.”

Hannibal's eyes were fixed on him like electrifying magnets. Will stifled a hiss, when fingernails rammed mercilessly into his covered sides.

“There was no need to do that. You’d be a beautiful David.”

“Of course I would.” he repeated. He moved closer to Hannibal, so that their breath almost crossed as he spoke. He gave a damn about what other guests could think of them in this position, whispering and sharing their secrets. “But then I thought hey, *maybe* my psychatrist wants to be the only one to sculpt me? Also, I don’t want to read about Connor’s death in next week’s newspaper, castrated and impaled on top of his own beloved Rotonda ... I found it very rude how unidimensional his intentions towards me were, though. I’m more than a piece of meat, aren’t I?”

Hannibal awarded him with a punctured smile.

“You are indeed.” he said. It was a promise. Will sighed, but rather for the reason that the penetrating pressure in his sides softened. “You give me cruel ideas.” he heard the doctor say.

“Fine.” Will did as he’d hardly hold back a yawn. “When does the eclipse start? It get’s boring here.”

“Soon.” Hannibal looked at the sky, squinting, smirking as the light burned into his retina. “The glasses are in my pocket.”

“Can we go after that? Right off?” the profiler asked. Hannibal looked at him long. Will countered with a pleading advancement of his lower lip.

“Right off.” he finally agreed. It made Will relax fully. He sighed.

“Thanks.” It was sincere. At the same time he was surprised that Hannibal gave in. But when he saw Connor’s figure approaching them from the corner of his eye, he harbored an inkling why ... perhaps his story had enabled the doctor’s idiosyncratic defense. It bothered him not**.** However, he was cautious, moving away from him and preventing any other direct contact. Whether he did this intentionally to send out wrong signals for Lecter or Connor, remained to be seen. It was spontaneous. And maybe this spontaneity would bring him into an early grave... but not today.

The friendly glow of the yellow sun clung to Connor’s olive skin and glistened down in the bubbling champagne, whirling in the two glasses he carried in front of him.

“Well, you’ve found each other quickly.” he said, and held his cargo out to them. They took it and Will’s finger slipped a little on the black stem of the glass, before holding it properly.

“Now, Will is not allowed to be overlooked easily, I’d say.” Hannibal announced softly. Connor brought a smile to his lips, but Will realized that it was constrained.

“I won’t deny that.” He turned to the doctor. “Oh, Hannibal, Susi asked for you.”

Hannibal’s expression mingled with shallow memory.

“Susi? Susi Clockmane?”

“Exactly.” Connor nodded his head to the right. “She was very excited about your Stockholm article in *Psychology Today* and would like to ask you a few questions about it. Would you be so kind and...” He left the sentence unfinished.

Hannibal understood. And yet his brow furrowed.. “Of course. I'll satisfy her curiosity.” He bent to Will. “Don’t drink too much.”

“Hurry up.” was the reply. Merciless truth was that Hannibal's disappearance did not please him. In fact he was dead sure that Connor had just mentioned 'Susi' for one reason - to recruit the doctor out of hearing and sight. Barely an hour ago Will would have probably welcomed this situation. Now… he liked it less. He felt Connor’s impertinent gaze rest in his hair like fishing hooks. The grip on his glass tensed up a bit.

“I'm beginning to understand why you’ve called your relationship with Hannibal *intimate*.” it echoed against his skull. Will turned around.

“Oh really?” he asked and, to his displeasure’s defiance, he put a snarling smile on his mouth. Connor did not reflect it. His former joy, spanning body and soul, was like swept away. What was left of it soaked into thoughtfulness.

“Yes.” The green in his eyes, earlier flowing and reveling, was frozen. “After all, you don’t make that much effort to hide it. It is, how did you say again ? Very bold?”

“I'm sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Will peered into his champagne and watched as tiny golden bubbles rose up from the bottom of the glass and burst open like erupting lava. “The relationship between Hannibal and me is so close as the bond of a therapist and his patient allows.”

“You don’t need to lie to me. I recognize a fuck-relationship when I see one.”

Will frowned imperceptibly.

“I beg your pardon?”

In Connor’s gaze grew something he equated with burgeoning anger.

“You know what I mean. Patient and therapist? Don’t make me laugh. In the past, perhaps, but now, things are different. He sticks on you like a gnat.” the host growled. The skin of his neck sneaked into a dark red shading. Will watched as it crawled along the throbbing artery and crouched under the jaw. “Listen, I did not lie when I told you I *know* Hannibal. And he is not what he appears to be. If you want my advice – stop this. Flee. Break up with him while you can. Leave the country for some weeks, months, somewhere you can’t be found without difficulty. If it’s about the money, I’ll pay for everything.”

Will looked at him in astonishment. He almost forced an appreciative whistle down his throat. Apparently it seemed Connor knew more about Hannibal's true nature, as he had been granted to him earlier. Interesting ... but how? What story stored behind it?

Despite this, he gave a prompt reply.

“Sorry, but to finish or deepen my acquaintance with Hannibal is my decision, not yours.” he said, so pious and sweetly that he could literally count how the synapses in Connor’s being cut off second by second.

“If you love to suck his cock so much, then do it. Stay with him. *Wither*.” he said. Despite the pleasant temperature his tone was like ice. “He is a *maestro* in puppetry. He loves the threads with which he coordinates actions, but never the doll itself. He will make you dance, consume, wring out and then throw away like a used condom. No one is ever interesting enough for him that he bears him for years. He does not have a heart to share. And if he does, you won’t have a long life. He devours what he loves. I don’t want this be done to you. Let me help you.”

Will laughed, emptied his champagne with a gurgling, sweeping train. Then he gently put down his empty glass on the table before he completely intertwined his view with Connor’s again. Amiable and tender.

“Unfortunately, I must reject your offer. No one can help me. Except him.” he said softly. It was doubtful whether he thereby told this to his counterpart or himself.

He still wore an extremely ravishing smile on his lips as he clenched his fist and broke the bridge of Connor’s nose with a single, powerful blow.

***

The late afternoon greeted them with a warm breeze that lashed against Will’s cheeks and pulled him from his uneasy doze. Angrily he tapped beside him, until he found the switch and cranked up the pane till it closed. He sighed with relief.

“How do you feel?”

Hannibal's voice reminded him of the whirring of a reconditioned motor boat in that moment. Such a strange connection of past and present memories…

“I breathe.” he replied sparsely. He avoided Hannibal’s gaze by all means. “I won’t apologize for my behavior.”

“I won’t ask you to.” said Hannibal assiduously. Will snorted. Sometimes their conversations seemed to expire in a pre-made dance. Funny, somehow. Deliberate.

“All right. Saves time.” he drawled. And swallowed.

“He wasn’t too happy about my rejection.” he explained. “And ... let's say he did choose no lovely words for your dealing with me.”

The eyes of the elder flickered over to him, then back to the road. He turned left. In a few minutes they would reach Baltimore's downtown.

“Just because I still hate you for what you did to Abigail, I won’t tolerate that one belittles you to the level of an ordinary baiting. Not as long as I’m around.” he revealed grumpily.

“You've defended my honor. How chivalrous.”

Will cleared his throat. He was not anxious to romanticize his actions. Unfortunately, this was one of Hannibal's favorite pastimes.

“Call it as you want. He had a dirty mouth in general.” He hid half of his face in the stretched material of his belt. “The food was cheap. The champagne was stale.”

“I found it passable.” A short break. “The shrimps were a little vapid.”

The comment brought Will a little grin.

“Maybe we're just spoiled ...”

“Of what? My cooking?”

“Depends on how one looks at it.”

“It suits you to be spoiled. You’ve experienced it too rarely in your life.”

Will rolled his eyes.

“Thanks for nothing.”

After that, they only spoke the least. Rather trivial things, such as the question of whether Jack had already found the corpse of Sarah Montgomery, the woman who had wanted to sell Hannibal rotten meat two days earlier.

Right after Will had punched Connor, they left the house. Hannibal apologized for the uneloquent disturbance and returned the glasses, but had neither come to Will's nor Connor's defence otherwise**,** whose jacket was sprinkled with imbibed drops of blood. He tried to curb the red rivulets dripping down his chin with a handkerchief, but had little success with that.

(Will did not begrudge him the mess.)

He had expected Hannibal to be furious when they sat in the car and he started the engine. He waited, but nothing came. if Hannibal *was* furious, he did not show anything of it.

It took some time until they finally parked in front of Hannibal's house and stepped out of the car. They went to the door and Will watched Hannibal, as he took his keys from his pocket and opened the door. The small crunch slammed into his ears like fireworks. For some time he felt strangely dizzy and did not know why. As if he would walk on quicksand.
They went in and Hannibal opened the buttons of his suit jacket, put it off and hung it accurately over his upper arm. He reached out a hand to Will, waiting in silence until he was entrusted with a part of his wardrobe as well. Then he went and Will knew he would tuck both in his wardrobe. The profiler looked after him thoughtfully. Actually, he had no use for such expensive clothes in his own home. It seemed only logical that Hannibal stowed it, for he was the one who had bought it for him anyway. Perhaps he would bring him the complete suit tomorrow and ask him to keep it until a new event brought it out of the cupboard ...

An attack of vertigo surprised him like a hyena biting into the back of his neck. Instinctively, he leaned against the wall beside him, blinked several times to clear his dull dipped view. There was a tug in his stomach that felt like tiger claws sharpened through his flesh.

Steps echoed in his head, the pale glow of a switched-lamp. The opening of something. Was Hannibal in the kitchen?

"Are you hungry? There speaks nothing against a light snack before dinner." he called to him. Will reluctantly shoved himself away from the wall and faltered down the hallway, closer to Lecter. He really found him inside his *sacred gourmet sanctuary*, his attention focused on the entrails of the refrigerator. His jacket was vanished and he wore not more than a clean white shirt and black dress pants. He looked so casual, it almost occurred unreal to Will. With difficulty he leaned against the door frame and gasped. The sheer mention of eating suddenly let his bowels revolt.

"I'm not sorry about what I've done." he sat abruptly, ignoring Hannibal's question intentionally. "But I did not mean to embarrass you through it."

"You haven't." replied the doctor without looking up. "He harassed you, you defended yourself. What is reprehensible about that?"

"Connor would certainly not describe it the way you do." Will brought a hand to his forehead, drew two fingers against his skin. It glowed. His neck was sweating. No good signs.

Hannibal took a perl-coloured piece of meat, wrapped in foil, from the top shelf and closed the fridge. Turning his back on Will, he put the meat on the counter, opened one of his shelves and picked some spices from their depths.

“Even if, it’s not relevant to me. Not anymore.”

“You choose me instead of the placeholders of high society? Without time to consider your options?” Will's breathing became shallow, then harsher with each passing second.

“Because there is little to con-“ Hannibal froze in mid-motion. He put a few of the bottles he had taken from his supplies gently on the counter before turning to the younger man. The shock as he recognized his panting frame crystallized dully in the shaded edges of his delicately dilated pupils.

“Will?”

The tone in which he pronounced his name was enough to knock down Will's self-control like a house of cards. He staggered to the side and almost lost his balance. His vision had become unreliable, cloudy like sour milk. Everything seemed to turn and to atomize into star-shaped, black dots.

The only thing he perceived concretely were Hannibal's hands on his arm and back that prevented him from falling.

“Sorry.” he muttered hoarsely. Even the letters grew hazy in his mouth. And he hated it. “I ... I feel queasy.”

One of the arms encircled his waist, while fingers entangled with his own.

“Come.” was all Hannibal said. Will did not answer. A power that did not belong to him, led his legs stumbling out of the room, from there on he merely saw a pattern of pale gray. He lost track of time. Eventually he was forced to his knees and the round throat of a toilet appeared in front of his face. He could not complain about the hands that were pressed flat against his forehead and abdomen, nor prevent the words that blew in a slurred mantra through his hair. All he was capable was to look at his own trembling arms before his body jerked and bucked and he concentrated on inhaling miserable breaths between his opened lips.

Seconds later, he coughed out. Moist and clear saliva drops splashed onto the ceramic, ran into the drain’s lake. Will thought briefly of the rain that had knocked on the car windows. He was shaking. The first torrent he vomited was yellowish and equipped with chunks of various origins. It was also the last he tried to resist most. Only then his body gave in to the agonizing procedure and got him in a choking, autonomous rhythm. Hannibal's constant presence enveloped him like an airtight capsule and yet he felt no panic, only the pure being of the other man. He could hear him praise him, felt his palm heaved against his stomach to lighten this terrible act, his fingers that seemed icy in contrast to his heated forehead.

“You're doing very, very well, Will. Hold nothing back. It will be over soon.” it surged

against his temple. And it repeated itself many, many times.

Will tried to say something, but it ended in an inarticulate whimpering when indefinable broth left his overwrought esophagus again. Tears without sorrow fell from his eyes and splashed in the unsavory pool underneath. He made a move to raise his arm, but Hannibal knew his purpose and operated the toilet. Then the cycle began anew. The smell was tainted and clinical and Will wished he could close his nostrils with wax.

After a period that seemed like a century, only bare breath left his numb mouth and he spat several times in order to wipe out the bitter taste on his tongue.

They remained in place until Hannibal stood up behind him and Will thought his world would be turned upside down yet again.

“N-No.” At the same moment he would have liked to bite off his tongue, had it not currently felt like a saturated cotton ball. He wanted to get up, but hands parked on his shoulders and pushed him down gently, but firmly.

“I'll be right back. Wait.”

Hannibal went and left him alone. Will made no further attempt to stand up on his own. Too risky. He spat again. Migraine had stretched its fibrous talons and tortured the inside of his skull like a jackhammer editing a brick wall. He vegetated in his own delirium until Hannibal returned, and spread a towel over his shoulders as if it were a blanket. Carefully, he turned Will away from the toilet’s sight and brushed over his mouth, wiped the sweat from his face, neck and hair carefully. He did not admit how good it actually felt to be taken care of like that. It was a paradox to what the doctor was capable of otherwise.

He winced like a frightened mouse, as something solid tapped his lips. It was a cup with liquid in it. Will smelled peppermint, eucaplytus and other herbs that mingled among them.

“Here, rinse out your mouth with this.”

Will did, took several sips and made his best to gargle with the stuff until he spit it back into the toilet. His teeth felt still furry, but at least the bitterness was removed to a pale echo and the aura of nausea no longer clung to him like a leech. He opened his mouth soundlessly as a forehead leaned against his and Hannibal’s breath curled over his sore lips.

“You’re slightly feverish.” he muttered. “I'll take you to bed. Can you stand up?”

Will remained silent. He could not find the words, nor the will to answer his question. He felt a train under his armpits when he was pressed and half-towed, half carried out of the bathroom. The ground rubbed slippery beneath his feet. It was like a dream, like being in one of his hallucinations. The only difference was that he took over the role of the victim. He did not like this role at all.

Hannibal put him on the bed and the first thing Will did as he slipped off his shoes and

unbuttoned his shirt was burying his face in a clean pillowcase and inhale deeply. The next moment he felt fingers that slid under his chin and turned him over, then disappeared again. His right arm was grabbed and Will shrugged involuntarily as something fine pricked into the skin of its crook. He did not need to look to the side to know it was a syringe. The feeling stopped soon and the pricked vein was closed with a patch. Hannibal's hand returned and clung to his temple in a motherly gesture.

"How do you feel?"

"As if I had puked out my soul." it crumbled between Will's lips. Which he had, actually. His breathing had regulated, but still stars and shadows merged in his sight. Hannibal's shape swept in bright/ dark waves over his retina and slowly condensed into proportion and color.

"Have you felt nauseous during the party? Or while driving?"

"No ... not till now."

Hannibal shook his head vaguely as he'd mentally talk to himself.

"Your eyes are littered with broken veins. Your blood pressure is far too high. This is not normal for a simple nausea." he diagnosed. He checked Will's pulse at the carotid artery. "What did you ingest?"

"I ... I don't know ..."

"Will, please. I need to know."

Will narrowed his eyes and struggled to hunt his short-term memory for appropriate information.

"The shrimps." he said finally. "A few of these appetizers, but all guests ate them."

"What else? What did you drink?" Will realized how Hannibal's baritone hardened to malachite at his next words. "Did Connor offer you something when you were alone?"

"No. O-only the champagne. That one glass."

"Did the champagne smell or taste different, as you know otherwise?" Will groaned.

"I don't drink champagne often, Hannibal."

"Did it taste pungent?"

"A bit ... doughy." Will took a rattling breath. Migraine still resided in full bloom. "A bit much." he added rougher.

Hannibal nodded it off.

“He poisoned you.” he judged. And despite Will's point of view cleared so slowly, he saw a golden pendant flicker in Hannibal's eyes. The announcement of a fresh murder. The eyes of the Chesapeake Ripper. It made Will feel anxiety, on the other hand ... there was a very peculiar form of emotion he could not explain. He did not want to. And he cursed it.

His hand, sweating and exhausted, stretched out and wedged in Hannibal’s sleeve.

“Don’t do that.” he whispered. Hannibal looked at his hand, then at him. Confused.

“What?”

“Don’t rage for me.”

The doctor’s face smoothed out immediately.

“Why not?”

“It makes it more difficult to hate you. Stop that.” confessed to the profiler vaguely. He closed his languid lids, calling oxygen into his lungs. His body was shaking with convulsive aftershocks. “In addition, it involves a huge risk. Every. Fucking. Time.”

“My anger is just, Will. Look at you.” Will opened one eye and glared at him.

“*Just*. Explain this *just* to Sarah.” he said dryly. Hannibal did not answer him. Instead, he walked around the bed, took off his shoes and lay with Will on the mattress, facing him. Will had no argument that would have prevented him from that.

“I thought Connor and you are friendly?” he muttered.

Hannibal thought.

“Most of the time.” he decided. “But there was an incident by which I might have fallen from grace.”

Will raised a brow.

“What have you done?”

Hannibal inspected the bedside lamp beside them with keen interest.

“I ate his butler.”

Will thought to have misheard. Well, *he wished*, he had.

“You did WHAT!?” His voice cracked. Not a second later it was thanked to him with a cascade of new throbbing blows on his nerves and his body responded by drawing his knees up and crouch, one arm carefully dragged over an ear.

“He had uttered derogatory things about my Japanese aunt when Connor went out of the room to make a phone call. I ate his breast meat in a Margret de canard au poivre and paired it with a good Merlot.” spoke Hannibal, shooed Will’s arm away to replace it with his own fingers massaging his scalp. “Maybe he and Connor had a more intimate relationship than I’d taken into account back then. The typical master-and-servant menagerie as they say.”

Will groaned in annoyance, but said nothing against the massage.

“Damn it, Hannibal, and you tell me this just now?”

“I never knew that he might suspect me of having committed this act. I was younger ... maybe he recognized my stitches.”

Now Will saw the light.

“He warned me while you were gone. He wanted to convince me by all means to break off contact with you.” He thought. “Why hasn’t he tried to turn you in?”

“He probably had no cogent evidence. I was thorough. In addition, men like him don’t solve such problems in public. They take it personally.”

“…Great.”

“What did he say?”

The younger man blinked.

“Hm?”

“When you were alone with him.” Hannibal repeated. The pressure of his fingers increased, but did not mature into unpleasant territory. “What else did he say?”

Will swallowed.

“That I was going to die as a doll in your hands. Like everyone else.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. My fist replaced my words.”

“So that's why you lost your temper.”

Will remained quiet. There was no need to respond. It was obvious. He did not even grunt when Hannibal’s circling movements ceased.

“You're not my doll, Will. I could not tame you as you are now. You are free, though you’re not free of me.”

“And you wanted to achieve that all this time?”

“I just wanted to help you to live without fear. Beyond other things.”

Will managed a withered smile.

“You didn’t manage that.” he said. “I'm still scared. Occasionally.”

Hannibal's eyes stayed mild.

“But not of yourself.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No... or, maybe, yes.” He avoided his eyes. “But not the way you might think.”

“How do I think?”

“The cannibalistic way. The murderous. The bloody.”

“And which would be the right way then?” Hannibal sounded genuinely interested. Will made it easy for him. He took his hand from his hair, holding it closely.

“You don’t need weapons to put me out of action. No gun. No knife.” He bowed so that the tanned fingers groped over his mouth as he spoke. “Your lips are enough to make me bleed. This is what I fear most.”

Hannibal was very quiet for those words.

“What about my hands?” he asked. Will turned his hand around and ran his lips over its back, searching for the slim, violet veins beneath the skin.

“Like fire. They burn my flesh. It hurts.”

“Hurt is not all you feel when I touch you.”

It was a statement, not a question. Will did not contradict him.

Hannibal wriggled slowly from Will’s provisional grip and gently stroked his knuckles over his pale cheek.

“Connor will suffer for this.” He touched his forehead. “And this.” His chest, where the heart knocked against bone.” “And this.” The light curve of his acid stomach.

The profiler just looked at him. He knew that Hannibal had mentally marked the places he would cut out the organs he intended to take from Connor. The brain, the heart, and perhaps

his liver or his spleen, his intestines, depending on what he needed for each recipe.

“You've only kept in touch with him so he invites you to his parties on this stupid villa, right? You don’t even try to like him.” he bared his thoughts.

“Do you think me so shallow?” Hannibal did not even seem to be upset.

“Are you kidding me? You adore fine arts. And a perfect replica of the Rotonda outside of Italy is hard to find. You’re not shallow - you're comfy.”

Hannibal's mouth lifted in accentuated wrinkels.

“There are worse vices.” he replied. “You start to remove my layers.”

“As you pile up mine.” countered Will bluntly. He rubbed his cheek deeper into the pillow. His breath surged over the fabric. The migraine had meanwhile lost most of its fear. It was bearable. “What do you think? Will we lose attraction for each other soon as we’ve finally broken through every stone of our walls and analyzed the details inside? Will we get bored of each other? Will you eat me then?”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly.

“I've told you before... I could never entirely predict you. This won’t change within the next few years.”

“And what if it does?”

“I'm not going to lose interest in you that quickly, Will. You’ll evolve as much as I do.”

“You say that now ... “ Will missed the hand on his cheek already. “What do you see when you look at me? Be honest.”

Hannibal bowed his head. His throat was bare and unprotected. Will was too weak to bite or strangle him, and the doctor knew it all too well.

“My future.” he said. “What do you see?”

“My death.”

“Love is like dying. When it’s real.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I think it’s closest to the truth.”

“Sounds as if love is rather a curse than a blessing.”

“It’s both. That makes it so insidious.”

“No particularly bright prospects.”

“I would accept the grave ... if you’d lay next to me.”

Will laughed a little breathless.

“Is it this then? Till death do us part?” He thought it was cheesy. And yet it fit to Hannibal, somehow. The psychatrist frowned.

“Isn’t this line not written for just that?”

“I'm not eager to die soon. What about you?”

“When my time comes, it comes. But I won’t volunteer to shorten it.”

“Then we agree at one point at least.”

He rolled onto his back and directed his focus on the jade-coloured digits of the digital alarm clock at his side, suddenly remembering Connor's eyes. It was a little after five o’clock in the evening.

“The eclipse is over, I guess.” He dropped his eyes. “I'm sorry that you haven’t seen it. I should have smashed his face in *after* that.”

“You are more evanescent than a solar eclipse.” Hannibal replied simply. “It will repeat itself in eleven years, as it has today. You won’t. No moment in which you age is recoverable. I prefer to see you. And only you.” Another long breath. “I'll still prefer it in eleven years.”

Will there even be eleven years granted to us? Or five? Or one? Will wanted to ask him, but he bit his tongue.If he thought of it, it was better that some things were unknown until they happened.

“If so, why did you want to go there with me that desperately, huh?”

Hannibal sighed.

“A narcissistic impulse, I admit ... - You have to know, Connor happily showers his fellow men with the cultural and artistic wealth he hoards in like a dragon his hills of gold. In the long run this can turn out very rude. He once told me that he could buy everything and everyone, as long as he knows the price. I wanted to introduce him to something his theory could never embrace.”

Will hummed. *Well, it worked. Kinda.*

“I think he is a very poor man. No amount of money will change that.”

“How so?”

“He reminds me a bit of Pygmalion.” Will turned away from the alarm clock and back to Hannibal. “He surrounds himself with beauty like a shell made of glass and despite of this none of his beloved works will ever come to life and talk to him. About thirty guests were invited to his party and nobody approached him to ask for his well-being on their own, did you notice that? He is lonely. He probably thought if he would save me - if he could carve a likeness of me, encased in a single room for hours and days, I would fall in love with him in time, like the creation itself should fall in love with its creator. But I'm not his creation. Not his David. I could never be.”

He saw a flash of curiosity spark in Hannibal’s iris.

“Whose creation are you then?”

“My own. Surroundings may influence me as they want, but in the end I’m always the one to reinvent myself. That’s what all people do. They do it to survive.”

“Hm.” Apparently, Hannibal found this answer acceptable. “I feel lucky that I don’t need to share Pygmalion's fate.”

Will grinned.

“Oh, don’t you?”

“How should I? You're so full of life already. So bursting with opportunities and malice. It would bring me no satisfaction to take it from you now, as Connor fears.”

“It would border on self-mutilation.”

“One way or another.”

A chirping choir from outside broke over them in a heartbeat. It sounded peaceful. *A lullaby for those who don’t have a mother that could sing to them* Will thought. The fleeting notion of his own mother, he pushed aside quickly.

“The birds sing.” he said wearily.

“The messengers of approaching spring.”

“And what will it bring?”

“A rebirth of nature and soul.”

“Actually, I would have thought of more fresh corpses.”

“This is likely to be added on occasion. Spring inspires the mind and its creative vein.”

“Poor Jack.” Will thought of the pills, the agent recently gulped down when he was sure no one was looking. “I’m worrying about his blood pressure.”

“You should not worry much about other people. Concentrate on yourself and what makes you feel alive.”

“What a noble advice. And so *selfless*.” He touched his skull. “God, this headache kills me.”

“Shall I get an aspirin?”

“No ... no.” The following words he pulled out with force between his teeth. “Just stay here, okay?”

Hannibal looked at him with a benevolent expression.

“As you wish.” he said lightly. So complacent. Will secretly called him an asshole for that. Oh, speaking of 'asshole' ...

“Connor ... you're going to kill him, right?”

“He brought you into this miserable predicament to punish your decision and hurt me. I’m not going to tolerate that without *returning the favor*.”

“You’ll lose the villa.”

“You are more important than any old building out there. You’re a work of art yourself.” Hannibal's eyes narrowed to slits. “I'm sorry that my decisions caused you harm.”

Will shrugged with a weak shoulder.

“I should be used to it by now, shouldn’t I ?” he joked lamely.

“I had not planned it.”

“Accidents happen.”

“Not with me.”

Will just laughed.

“You’d even plan your own accidents, wouldn’t you?” he teased. And actually knew that there was no need to question.

Hannibal got up a little, supporting his torso with a bent arm.

“If the situation requires it... yes.” Will smiled. He knew him so well after all. So well that it hurt.

“Would I be of the party? We could be hit by a car. Or travel on a cruise ship and sink in the ocean. No trace, no bodies. Nothing.” he muttered.

“Would you really want to part from this life with me? Or just fake it so that the world may leave us alone?“

“Yes, I think is the answer to that.”

Hannibal merely shook his head.

“You should rest now. Your dogs will do fine without you for one night.”

Will snorted in amusement.

“Is that a medical order or a *friendly* advice, doctor? “

Hannibal tucked a loosened streak behind his ear and remained there for a while until he moved back again. He sat up and grasped a corner of the blanket.

“Yes, I think is the answer to that.” he said as he spread it over Will until it covered his chin. And Will understood.

He waited until dusk, red and bleeding, slumped behind the window and turned the sky into a violet, star-less blue, filling the room with mellow gloom.

Finally, he allowed himself to drift and fully sink into his own darkness, as he had done so often during last weeks. In the knowledge that Hannibal stayed beside him all night and would be the first thing he’d see in the early morning.

It had a certain advantage to be under the protection of a monster, as the process of metamorphosis, the change from birth into life and from life to death had their advantages and disadvantages. The horror of one monster banished the horror of others.

Though sometimes only for a single, stolen night.

For no one but them both.

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